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[For information concerning the life histories of four unidentified Polish poets, see category 116, pp. 82-191]

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CHAPTER I

The Pill of Murti-Bing

829 IT was only toward the middle of the twentieth century that the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy. Their bread, their work, their private lives began to depend on this or that decision in disputes on principles to which, until then, they had never paid any attention. In their eyes, the philosopher had always been a sort of dreamer whose divagations had no effect on reality. The average human being, even if he had once been exposed to it, wrote philosophy off as utterly impractical and useless. Therefore the great intellectual work of the Marxists could easily pass as just one more variation on a sterile pastime. Only a few individuals understood the causes and probable consequences of this general indifference.

● 538 829 A curious book appeared in Warsaw in 1932. It was a novel, in two volumes, entitled *Insatiability*. Its author was Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, a painter, writer, and philosopher, who had constructed a philosophical system akin to the monadology of Leibnitz. As in his earlier novel, *Farewell to Autumn*, his language was difficult, full of neologisms. Brutal descriptions of erotic scenes al-

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ternated with whole pages of discussions on Husserl, Carnap, and other contemporary philosophers. Besides, one could not always tell whether the author was serious or joking; and the subject matter seemed to be pure fantasy.

The action of the book took place in Europe, more precisely in Poland, at some time in the near future or even in the present, that is, in the thirties, forties, or fifties. The social group it portrayed was that of musicians, painters, philosophers, aristocrats, and higher-ranking military officers. The whole book was nothing but a study of decay: mad, dissonant music; erotic perversion; widespread use of narcotics; dispossessed thinking; false conversions to Catholicism; and complex psychopathic personalities. This decadence reigned at a time when western civilization was said to be threatened by an army from the East, a Sino-Mongolian army that dominated all the territory stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic.

Witkiewicz's heroes are unhappy in that they have no faith and no sense of meaning in their work. This atmosphere of decay and senselessness extends throughout the entire country. And at that moment, a great number of hawkers appear in the cities peddling Murti-Bing pills. Murti-Bing was a Mongolian philosopher who had succeeded in producing an organic means of transporting a "philosophy of life." This Murti-Bing "philosophy of life," which constituted the strength of the Sino-Mongolian army, was contained in pills in an extremely condensed form. A man who used these pills changed completely. He became serene and happy. The problems he had struggled with until then suddenly appeared to be superficial and unimportant. He smiled indulgently at those who continued to worry about them. Most affected were all questions pertaining to unsolvable ontological difficulties. A man who swallowed Murti-Bing pills became imper-

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vious to any metaphysical concerns. The excesses into which art falls when people vainly seek in form the wherewithal to appease their spiritual hunger were but outmoded stupidities for him. He no longer considered the approach of the Sino-Mongolian army as a tragedy for his own civilization. He lived in the midst of his compatriots like a healthy individual surrounded by madmen. More and more people took the Murti-Bing cure, and their resultant calm contrasted sharply with the nervousness of their environment.

The epilogue, in a few words: the outbreak of the war led to a meeting of the armies of the West with those of the East. In the decisive moment, just before the great battle, the leader of the Western army surrendered to the enemy; and in exchange, though with the greatest honors, he was beheaded. The Eastern army occupied the country and the new life, that of Murti-Bingism, began. The heroes of the novel, once tormented by philosophical "insatiety," now entered the service of the new society. Instead of writing the dissonant music of former days, they composed marches and odes. Instead of painting abstractions as before, they turned out socially useful pictures. But since they could not rid themselves completely of their former personalities, they became schizophrenics.

So much for the novel. Its author often expressed his belief that religion, philosophy, and art are living out their last days. Yet he found life without them worthless. On September 17, 1939, learning that the Red Army had crossed the eastern border of Poland, he committed suicide by taking veronal and cutting his wrists.

Today, Witkiewicz's vision is being fulfilled in the minutest detail throughout a large part of the European continent. Perhaps sunlight, the smell of the earth, little everyday pleasures, and the forgetfulness that work brings

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beer. He would hire a hack, order it to stop at a main intersection and, after delivering a speech to an astonished crowd, he would throw off his coat and phlegmatically relieve himself on it. Or he would come to his friends complaining that he had had trouble in finding their homes because, as he said, "his people," whom he had stationed throughout the city to point him the way, had so disguised themselves that he could not recognize them. Such extravagances indicated that alcohol plunged him into the world of Hoffmann or Edgar Allan Poe. He became a legendary figure whose latest escapades were the talk of the literary cafés.

Delta's poetry was an added source of legend. It was unlike anything written in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. No literary school influenced him. He dwelt in the aura of the Italo-Latin civilization whose mark was still deeply graven on our country. The accessories he borrowed from the poetry of the past he then put together in a manner reminiscent of his drunken fantasies. His poetry was a kaleidoscope of chubby baroque angels, magicians carried off through the window by some unknown power (they are retained, at the last moment by a wifely bite on the ear), falconry, astrologists prophesying the end of the world. Interspersed in it were phonograph records playing the music of Bach or Mozart, potatoes in the soil dreaming of the vodka that would be made of them, planets in the shape of young women dressed in blue pants, and folk dances in the suburbs. His poetry was tragic and comic, senseless yet full of sense. This alogical hodgepodge of disparate elements differed from confessedly decadent types of modern poetry in one respect: despite the peculiar assemblage of images it presented, it was not unintelligible. The reader surrendered to its musical charm, swallowed portions of abstraction that annoyed

[An unidentified poet of the 1930's and 1940's -- Analyst]

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him in other poets, laughed at the sudden twists of the author, in short, unsuspectingly entered a realm ruled by laws unlike those of everyday life.

He published much humorous verse, signing it with a variety of pseudonyms. His inventiveness in finding subjects seemed inexhaustible. Among other things, he wrote a cycle entitled *Little Songs of the Chief of the Office of Graves*. He liked to include a fictitious list of his works in each book; I remember such a title as "An Introduction to Cannibalism—stenographed university lectures: Troilus Drug Store, Publisher, out of print." Because he was popular with the readers, he never lacked offers from publishers and the radio. His pen, which was his sole means of support, could have earned him a good living; but he constantly needed money because he immediately drank up his fees.

When he was sober, no one could have guessed that he was the author of poems that made the public laugh. Taciturn, gloomy, sly, he became animated only at the sight of money. In bargaining, he was inexorable. Once he named a sum, no argument could induce him to make a concession. What was worse, he demanded payment at once, which posed a terrible dilemma for his editors. They wanted his poems; but giving him money involved the risk that he would begin his drinking cycle and forget his commitments. Some editors found a solution: they would give him the money, then refuse to leave him for a single second until he handed them a manuscript. Such transactions often occurred in coffee-houses. The banknote would lie on the table between the two contracting parties. Delta, after fruitless efforts to soften his opponent, would take out his pen, write the poem (which, depending on his mood, might be excellent or mediocre), and picking up his note go off to drink.

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Sometimes he landed in a sanatorium for alcoholics. The results of the "cures" were not good. His victories in his battles against the medical profession were widely recounted. In one of the sanatoriums, story has it, his triumph was so absolute that both patients and doctors, equally drunk, held bicycle races through the corridors.

Charlatan, drunkard—and yet he was an outstanding and, despite appearances, tragic poet. He began his literary career in years of economic crisis. Unemployment, universal hopelessness, the growth of Nazism in neighboring Germany all shaped the character of his writing. He was rightly called the "king of nonsense." Yet readers who were not deceived by his superficial buffoonery saw in his poetry an ominous vision of the end of civilization, of an approaching "iron age," of catastrophe. He spoke as if everything were lost years before Europe plunged into darkness and cruelty. The dread and beauty of past ages lived again in his work, but there was no hope of rest in them. The concepts and images he used had the consistency of dreams; they chased one another with the speed of a hurtling train. The Madonna who often figured in his poems was not the Madonna of the pious but merely a stylistic ornament. Fascists and Communists killed each other off in his verse with the gory ardor of actors in the Grand Guignol, while he mockingly cried: "O reality! O my sweet mother! For you killing flies is the same kind of bother!" He defined himself exactly when he said: "Braced on my Waterman/ I go off to the abyss/ of eternal doubt."

The End of the World is his title for a poem in which scholars and politicians, revolutionists, lovers and drunkards, canaries and cats are all swept away in the end by a cosmic catastrophe—to the satisfaction of the author, and the fulfillment of the "vanity of vanities" theme of *Ecclesi-*

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astes. And all this is described by a pen that is playing. In another of his poems, *Folk Fair,* there are carrousels, young pairs sitting on the grass, lawns littered with empty bottles, seesaws. Suddenly the sky clouds over, rain begins to fall, and the darkened heavens—in a manner that is a secret of Delta's art—merge into a sad eclogue by Virgil punctuated by the bark of machine-guns.

His most unusual poem was *Solomon's Ball.* Why does King Solomon give a ball? Why is he living in the twentieth century? Perhaps it is not King Solomon after all, simply Solomon? Why do the unemployed enter the ballroom selling butterflies? Who keeps singing Persian songs about Gulistan, the garden of roses? Where do the hordes of policemen come from who suddenly start performing wild dances? It is pointless to pause over such questions. The special logic of the dream does exist, but only such a poet as he can use it freely. "In the room the women come and go talking of Michelangelo" was T. S. Eliot's expression for nonsense. Delta raised the conversations that took place at Solomon's ball one degree higher, into the realm of delirium and "eternal doubt."

The world as reflected in his poetry was oppressive; yet his poems—and here is one more inner contradiction of this queer man—were free of sadness and despair. On the contrary, they said a vigorous "yes" to life. With every word he praised the world as he saw it, a tangle of absurd pleasures, drives, words, and wars. He loved his phantasmagory. He loved carrousels, dancing gypsies, crowded Sunday excursion boats on the Vistula, his wife to whom he addressed his odes, cats sleeping on parapets, blooming apple trees. He loved enthusiasm and joyousness for their own sake. Whatever he touched changed into a scene of movement, color, and music. Subjects were merely a pretext for him. Like a silkworm, he spun out of himself a